DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 352 213 PS 021 076

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TITLE After-School Reunion Interaction in Single Versus Two-Parent Families.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *After School Programs; Check Lists; Comparative Analysis; Differences; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; *Nuclear Family; *One Parent Family; *Parent Child Relationship; Parents; *School Age Day Care
IDENTIFIERS *Reunion Behavior

ABSTRACT

This study measured parent-child interactions when parents picked up their children at an after-school day care center. It was hypothesized that parents from two-parent families would have better interactions with their children than single parents. The subjects of the study were 40 single parents and 40 parents from two-parent families, as well as 50 girls and 30 boys, who were children of these parents and who all attended the same after-school child care center. On five occasions, observers rated all parent-child pairs on a Parent-Child Interaction Checklist (PCIC) that was devised to measure differences in parent-child interaction. It was found that single parents received significantly higher scores than parents in two-parent families on all measures of quality and quantity of reunion interaction. These measures were quality of emotional interaction, amount of physical interaction, amount of verbal interaction, and amount of time spent with the child. These findings challenge the conventional notion that single parents have less time and energy to devote to their interactions with their children than parents in two-parent families. An appendix compares the scores of the single parents and parents in two-parent families on the PCIC measures. (MDM)

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ED352213

After-School Reunion Interaction in Single Versus Two-Parent Families

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Many believe that married couples are able to provide more time for their children than single parents. It is also commonly assumed that married couples do in fact spend more time and have better interactions with their children. This study was designed to measure parent-child interaction upon pick-up at an afterschool day care. A Parent-Child Interaction Checklist(PCIC) was devised to examine this. It was hypothesized that dual parents would have better interactions with their children. The subjects in this study were 80 families. There were 40 parents from the single parent group and 40 parents from the two parent group. The sample consisted of 50 girls and 30 boys from these various groups of parents, who all attended a local afterschool child care center.

Summary scores on the four components(verbal, physical, time and emotional) of the Parent-Child Interaction Checklist(PCIC) were obtained for each child by totalling the values for the four observation episodes for each item. An overall scale score was computed by adding the four component subscale scores for each subject. High scores indicate greater levels of emotional and physical interaction, more time spent with children while allowing them to get ready, and greater verbalizing to the child.

A t-test comparison of the single and married parent groups revealed significant differences on the overall measure of parent-child interaction($t=2.43$; $df=78$; $p<.02$). Single parents scored significantly higher on this measure($x=18.025$; $s.d.=3.230$; $n=40$) than married parents($x=16.15$; $s.d.=3.662$; $n=40$).

Separate t-test group comparisons showed a consistent pattern of significant difference on each of the four component measures of parent-child interaction.

There were clearly significant differences between single and dual parent families in parental-child interaction behavior. These findings here challenge the conventional notion that single parents have less time and energy to devote to their interactions with their children. To the contrary, this study's results suggest that single parents may invest greater energy in such interactions, than those from two-parent households.

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Introduction

There are many misconceptions and stereotypes about children from single parent and divorced families. Many people feel that children from these families are more troublesome and have poorer quality interactions with their parents. Negative stereotypes about single parenting are abundant. Many believe that these parents interact poorly with their children, spend less time with them, and are not as nurturing as married parents. These negative views are derived from the assumption that being a single parent is overtaxing, and that quality parenting requires the efforts and devotion of two married partners. The fact that most single parents must work outside the home and yet still perform all parenting tasks unaided, is often believed to create burdensome pressures that impair these parents' functioning.

Much of society feels that the intact, dual-parent family offers a more stable, nurturant environment for the child. It is assumed that divorce has a very negative impact on the child, and that there is no way that a child from a single parent family can be as well adjusted or as well behaved as their counterpart from a two parent household. Society views these children as more insecure, lacking self-esteem, and somewhat deficient in interpersonal communication skills. Society frequently assumes that children who come from intact families are more well adjusted and present fewer disciplinary problems.

Given the increasing number of children living in single parent homes, it is imperative to assess the factors contributing to any real developmental risks associated with this type of family. To date, research has yielded a contradictory picture of the effects of both divorce and single parenting on children.

Hetherington's(1979) research suggests that most children can cope with and adapt to the short-term crisis of divorce within a few years. However, if the crisis is compounded by multiple stresses and continued adversity, developmental disruptions can occur. The long term adjustment of the child is related to the more sustained or concurrent conditions associated with the quality of life in a household headed by a single-parent rather than to the discrete event of divorce. Important variables include alterations in support systems, the increased salience of the custodial parent, the availability of the non-custodial parent (to serve as a model or disciplinarian or to assume responsibility for household tasks and child care) and finally, changes in family functioning related to continued stresses associated with practical problems of living, such as altered economic resources(Hetherington,1979). Many changes in family interactions are associated with divorce and living in a single-parent family. In early studies, the role of loss or relative unavailability of the father was emphasized. More recently, family conflict, the increased salience of the custodial mother, and changes in mother-child interaction and in the life circumstances of the single-parent family have been the primary focus of research attention.

A high degree of discord typically characterizes family relations in the period surrounding divorce. The conflict between parents often enmeshes the child in controversy. Children are often exposed to parental quarreling, mutual denigration and recrimination, and are placed in a situation of conflicting loyalties, with one parent frequently attempting to coerce or persuade children to form hostile alliances against the other parent. This frequently results in demands for a decision to reject one parent which children are unprepared or unable to make(Hetherington,1979). However, not all children's experience of parental divorce includes these destructive dynamics. Furthermore, as time passes, the stresses on children frequently subside, enabling successful adaptation.

Much empirical work challenges attributing problems to divorce per se, when divorce might better be viewed as a marker for a disturbed family system, which often has been dysfunctional for years prior to the divorce. Hodges, Buchsbaum and Tieney(1983) report evidence that prenatal conflict within intact families has a more negative impact on children than subsequent divorce. It has been found that child rearing approaches, parent-child relationships, the severity of marital discord, social support, and the parents' response to the divorce may be as important as the fact of the divorce itself in determining children's adjustment.

When these researchers looked at the quantity of interaction between parents and preschool-age children, they found no difference between divorced and intact families in the amount of undivided attention the mothers gave to their children. In looking at the quality of parent-child interactions in relation to marital status, it was found that divorced mothers described themselves the same as married mothers in terms of warmth and restrictiveness with their children. For all families, reported maternal warmth was positively associated with children's adjustment. Mothers describing themselves as less warm tended to have children described as having behavioral problems, being distractible, and generally maladjusted at home. For both families, permissive home life was correlated with the child being less anxious or fearful at home. Satisfaction with the relationship with the child and enjoyment of time with the child were both related to a variety of adjustment measures(Hodges, Buchsbaum, and Tierney,1983).

According to Enos and Handal(1986), the crisis of divorce is likely to have a negative effect on most children's short-term adjustment. However, it was found that for adolescents, parental divorce was not a salient variable related to measures of long-term psychological adjustment. Their study of adolescents revealed that perception of current family conflict was significantly related to measures of psychological adjustment, regardless of marital status. This suggests that adjustment of adolescents is related to the level of current perceived conflict in the home rather than to divorce per se.

Because adolescents with divorced parents did not differ significantly from adolescents with still married parents on self report measures of psychological adjustment, it appears that

these adolescents perceived themselves as having been able to adapt to and cope with the crisis of divorce. The results of this study provide indirect support for the current view of divorce as a transitional life event whose long-term adjustment consequences are mediated by many psychological and situational variables.

Grossman and Adams(1980) reported earlier work indicating that following divorce, children are likely to experience disorganization in their daily lives. Further, the quality of interaction between the parent and the child appears to change. Grossman and Adams found evidence of delayed development for single-parent children. Single-parent pre-school children scored appreciably below their intact family peers on the vocabulary and similarity subscales of intelligence tests. This data might be interpreted as supporting the assumption that divorce and the ensuing single-parent life style is stressful for children and can cause detrimental developmental consequences.

However, previous research suggesting decreased maternal effectiveness in child-rearing and weakened mother-child interaction because of divorce was challenged by the self reports of the subjects in the Grossman and Adams(1980) study. Their data indicates that single-parent mothers view themselves as highly involved and reasonably effective in their child rearing behavior. Consistent with the findings of Hodges, et al (1983), single-parent mothers were found to be very similar in their self-reported behavior to two-parent family mothers.

Santrock, Warshak, Lindberg, and Meadows(1982) investigated children and parents in stepfather families. While research efforts in recent years have increased our knowledge about the effects of divorce on children, much less is known about what happens to a child when his or her custodial parent remarries. Some investigators have found no difference between stepfathers and intact families, while others reveal a more negative picture of stepparent families. The subjects in this study consisted of thirty-six families, half of whom have a boy and the other half of whom have a girl. One third of the families consisted of divorced mothers who had remarried(the stepfather group). The second group(one-third) had divorced mother who had custody but had not remarried. The final third represented children and parents from intact families in which there was no history of divorce or separation. The three groups were matched on the following variables: age (children were from 6-11 years old), sex of the child, family size, and socioeconomic status.

Parents were observed interacting with their children in a laboratory situation. The non-custodial parent in the divorced mother family was not included in the study. The observation data consisted of two videotaped ten minute sessions, in which each parent and child pair were asked to plan a weekend activity together and discuss the main problem of the family(Santrock,1982). Parent-child behaviors were rated separately on nine point scales at the end of each of the two ten minute segments. Parents were rated on warmth, self-esteem, anxiety, demandingness, maturity, sociability, and independence.

The most consistent finding was that boys in stepfather

families showed more competent social behavior than boys in intact families, which corresponded with more competent parenting behavior in those stepfather families. In contrast, girls in stepfather families were observed to be more anxious than girls in intact families. Boys showed more warmth toward their stepfathers than did girls, while there was a trend for girls to show more anger toward their mothers than did boys from stepfather families. Divorced and stepfather children differed only in a trend for boys from stepfather families to show more mature behavior than boys from divorced homes. Mothers of boys in stepfather families made more meaningful statements to them than the divorced mothers of boys. Few differences were found between divorced and intact families. The data suggest that such factors as parenting behavior, sex of the child, and marital conflict in any type of family structure are implicated as possible explanations of the child's social behavior(Santrock,1982).

In a comparison of mothers from single parent and dual parent families, Weinraub and Wolf(1983) found that despite their substantial pressures and more limited supports, single parents reported no more difficulties in overall coping ability than did married mothers. Only in the area of household chores did single mothers report more difficulties. When families were matched on number of children, maternal, and income variables, there were no significant differences observed in mother-child interactions in the two groups. The single parents fared no better or worse than their married counterparts in ability to exercise effective control, display of maternal nurturance; and ease in communicating with their children.

Barber and Eccles(1992) argued that negative stereotypes of single parent families and their children create additional problems for these children and disturb divorced women. In a study of sixty divorced women, they found that most of the children developed normally, despite critical, negative stereotypes held by teachers, counselors and media(Barber and Eccles,1992).

The impression gleaned from the often contradictory research findings in this area is ambiguous. There are many problems with past research on single parents. Use of small and unrepresentative samples limits the generalizability of much of the work. Furthermore, use of clinical samples often exaggerates the apparent pathology of children from divorced families. Samples also are predominantly drawn from white middle class families. Findings from these studies may not be generalized to other ethnic and economic groups. Even when randomly selected samples are used, it is rare that the sample is large enough to do complex multivarate analysis. These limitations may have fostered an inaccurate, overly negative portrayal of single parent families.

A more objective perspective might depict growing up with a single mother as presenting children and adolescents with a unique set of challenges. The divorced family can be a context that promotes competence and independence, and helps to strengthen the individual's; ability to manage later stress, much

as it can in other circumstances set the stage for neglect and deprivation. Most research has viewed the single-parent family as a pathogenic family and has failed to focus on how positive family functioning and support systems can facilitate the development of social, emotional, and intellectual competence in children in single-parent families.

The common societal belief that divorce has a negative impact on children has yielded many studies, some demonstrating differences between parent-child interactions in single and intact families, and others showing basically no differences between single and intact families. Many important questions remain. This naturalistic observational study will investigate parent-child interaction differences as a function of family type. Raters will unobtrusively assess the quality and quantity of parent-child interactions during reunion episodes following afterschool care, enabling evaluation of differences between single and dual parent families.

Methods

Eighty elementary school-age children and their parents participated in this study. Forty were from single parent households and forty were from dual parent homes (20 married; 20 remarried). The sample consisted of fifty girls and thirty boys; all attended a local afterschool day care center.

On five separate occasions unobtrusive observers rated all parent-child pairs using the Parent-Child Interaction Checklist(PCIC), which was designed for this study. The checklist assessed the quality and quantity of parent-child interactions upon pick-up from evening childcare. It consisted of four 5-point scale items evaluating the following: verbal behavior toward child upon pick-up, physical interaction between parent and child upon pick-up, the amount of time the parent allows the child to get ready, and what type of emotions the parent expresses to the child. Various demographs and household data were collected on all participants.

Results

Summary scores on the four components (verbal, physical, time, and emotional) of the Parent-Child Interaction Checklist(PCIC) were obtained for each child by totalling the values for the four observation episodes for each item. An overall scale was computed by adding the four component subscale scores for each subject. High scores indicate greater levels of emotional and physical interaction, more time spent with children while allowing them to get ready, and greater verbalizing to the child.

A t-test comparison of the single and married parent groups revealed significant differences on the overall measure of parent-child interaction($t=2.43$; $df=78$; $p<.02$). Single parents scored significantly higher on this measure($x=18.025$; $s.d.=3.230$; $n=40$) than married parents($x=16.15$; $s.d.=3.662$; $n=40$).

Separate t-test group comparisons showed a consistent pattern of significant difference on each of the four component measures of parent-child interaction (See Table 1 in Appendix).

In order to assess whether there were differences between the married and remarried dual-parent groups, oneway ANOVA were

performed on the summary and four component parent-child interaction measures for the three parent groups (single,n=40; married,n=20; remarried,n=20). These analyses revealed findings parallel to those of the t-tests; single parents received significantly higher scores than the two other parent groups on all measures of quality and quantity of reunion interaction.

Discussion

There were clearly singificant differences between single and dual parent families in parent-child interaction behavior. The findings here challlenge the conventional notion that single parents have less time and energy to devote to their interactions with their children. To the contrary, this study's results suggest that single parents may invest greater energy in such interactions, than those from two-parent households.

The notion that single parent families devote greater attention to their children runs counter to conventional expectations. However, there are several factors that could contribute to such an unanticipated reality. First, single parents may value their relationship with their children more because they often have no alternative source of social gratification within the family. This could increase the general emotional intensity of these parent-child relationships, which might explain the greater intensity of reunion interaction observed in this study. Another related possibility is that without the distraction of an adult mate, single parents might have greater time and energy to invest in relationships with their children. According to this view, the attention that otherwise would be devoted to a spouse or absorbed by the process of maintaining a marriage, becomes available for nurturing children in a single parent family.

Another possibility is that single parents commit greater energy to parenting because as the sole adult in the child's life, they feel more important, responsible, and in control. A resulting greater sense of ownership could conceivably make parenting more reinforcing. Single parents may interact more optimally with their children in response to what they see as a special challenge that has extraordinarily meaningful consequences. They may work to compensate for having complicated their child's life by divorcing. In addition, the unavailability of a coparent may reduce diffusion of responsibility, and engender an unambiguous sense of profound accountability. Furthermore, the fact that single parents are less likely than married spouses to be preoccupied by resentment over unequal distribution of childcare responsibilities within their marriage, might make afterschool pick up episodes less conflictual. According to this scenario, picking children up from afterschool care serves as a reminder of conflict for married parents struggling with such issues of fairness, which sets the stage for spousal anger that then gets displaced onto the innocent child. An abrupt, aloof reunion encounter could be the result.

The fact that single parents don't need to share responsiblity for afterschool pick up may also permit greater consistency in how reunion episodes unfold. As a result, interactions between parent and child may be more positive because reduced varibiality allows

all to operate more smoothly.

The possiblities described above all examine ways in which being a single parent may offer advantages in terms of the behavioral situation being sampled. Another explanation for this study's findings emphasizes instead the greater pressure upon single parents to create a defensive pretense of optimal parenting. Given negative stereotypes, single parents may be more reactive to public evaluation of their parenting, and as a result may work to fulfill an exaggerated image of parental devotion and patience. Although in this study efforts were made to keep the observational procedures as unobtrusive as possible, the unavoidable presence of another adult witnessing the reunion episodes may have been enough to inject artifactual demand characteristics. It is possible that the higher quality and quantity of parent-child interaction found in these single parents in the public situation does not reflect private behavior. In fact, it is conceivable that the pressure to maintain an orderly positive facade in public might actually contribute to greater frustration, and therefore could potentiate greater negative display in private.

Appendix

Table 1

Results of t-test comparisons of single and dual-parent family group scores on the PCIC subscale.

	Single Parents(n=40)		Dual Parents(n=40)	
subscales:				
Quality of emotional** interaction	x=19.125	s.d.=2.747	x=17.35	s.d.=2.646
Amount of Physical* interaction	x=18.125	s.d.=3.763	x=16.275	s.d.=3.162
Amount of verbal** interaction	x=18.75	s.d.=2.609	x=17.025	s.d.=2.684
Amount of time spent* with the child allowing them to get ready	x=18.025	s.d.=3.23	x=16.15	s.d.=3.662

*p<.05
**p<.01

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